

## **ATTENTION: STATUS OF WOMEN COMMITTEE ON INTIMATE PARTNER AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN CANADA**

I write this anonymously as I am currently embroiled in relentless litigation spanning over 2 years in the broken Ontario family court system. I am a physician providing care to cancer patients. My parents are immigrants who came to Canada hoping for a better life for themselves and future generations. They instilled in me the value of hard work and family above all else. Never in my worst nightmare would my parents or I envision the torture my children and I have endured in my marriage and post-separation.

I am a shell of the person I was due to the unrelenting emotional abuse and coercive controlling behaviour I endured during my 15 year marriage which persists through the litigation abuse I am enduring in the family court system. I have no medical reports, no pictures of bruises, no radiographs of broken bones. These scars run deep regardless.

My ex-husband is attractive, charming, wildly successful and wealthy. Abusers have no socioeconomic boundaries. During my marriage, my ex-husband was absent, always “working”, as I was left to raise our two children in addition to working as a physician. When he was present, he was authoritarian with the children, setting up a dynamic of fear and dominance since they were little. They have been uncomfortable and fearful of their father since a young age. He would easily get enraged with them, scaring them. This progressed as they got older as they are now both teenagers. Despite being an absent parent, when he was present he was critical of my parenting. I was never enough.

He displayed intensely jealous behaviour towards me throughout the marriage– interrogating me on the odd time I would go out with friends or to work functions, accusing me of infidelity, setting the house alarm to wake him so he could come downstairs and interrogate me. Yet when I would have him about his late nights “at work” or his lack of communication for days on end while away at work functions, he was dismissive and angry.

His displays of male privilege were pervasive. There was never respect of my work as a mother or physician. His work and desires were always prioritized.

He broke into my email, my phone, asked me to show him my call log and let me regularly look through his phone. He woke me up in the middle of the night on multiple occasions to interrogate me, confining me and berating me – swearing at me, calling me lazy, crazy, horrible person etc. The children heard many of these arguments.

He accused me of stealing \$100 000 from our bank account – I was up all night scrambling to figure out how I could have mishandled that much money. In the end it came to light that he had invested the money months before. He spent tens of thousands of dollars over the years without telling me yet the expectation was that I run all big purchases by him. He would bring home the visa bill and ask me to account for my spending but never did so with his spending. I did not have access to our bank accounts despite asking numerous times, until finally I had a bank teller help me gain online access.

Our arguments over the years got progressively more heated, whereby he threatened divorce and to move out. I knew I couldn't have the marriage end for fear of what he would do to the children if alone with them. Living with him was like constantly walking on eggshells – never knowing how he would react or behave on any given day or in any given situation.

The arguments got progressively more heated over the years and his behaviour more aggressive. I told him numerous that I feared violence and confided this in friends and family. I became progressively more withdrawn and submissive, which made him more paranoid and aggressive.

After one final argument where I told him I feared violence, I stopped having sex with him. That was the kiss of death. His aggressive and predatory behaviour escalated, with more interrogation, more demands to search my phone and he attempted install spyware on our home computer.

He then turned to the kids. Given his absenteeism and behaviour, he never formed a strong attachment to the children. He became hyper-focused on them, and they too progressively withdrew from him. He began to blame me for the behaviour of the children, saying that I turned the kids against him. He purchased books on alienation and consulted an alienation expert.

The marriage ended and I suddenly found myself in a “he said-she said” scenario whereby I was trying to express the IPV the children and I suffered and he denied everything. We have had a section 30 assessment and a counselor involved, both of whom believe his false alienation claim and discount the lived experience of the children and I. He is pushing for time with the kids which they do not wish to have and is forcing reunification therapy upon them – awful intense therapy that research has shown to do more harm than good.

The post separation abuse has escalated. I have had 7 court appearances in 11 weeks and have spent \$300,000 on this litigation. He has put forth a motion to sell the house despite us promising the children we would do what we could to keep it. He has millions of dollars in the bank and has hired 5 lawyers. I have moved to a lawyer with lower fees and am still not able to keep up, spending more on legal fees each month than I earn. He has pushed for an expedited trial which I cannot afford. I am deep in litigation abuse.

We are currently in a reassessment with the section 30 assessor who continues to believe my ex-husband’s accounts despite the children and I saying otherwise. The alienation claim against me has silenced my voice and that of the children, as he claims they are “brainwashed” and should not be listened to. The children are refusing to spend overnights with him and he is threatening a contempt motion against me, as well as threatening a custody reversal and black out period.

He is relentless. Messages and letters from his lawyer come every 24 to 48 hours. No one is listening. I feel as though I am sitting on the couch screaming for help as my ex-husband burns the house down.

How can this be stopped? It has become common place in Canada for abusers to counter abuse allegations with parental alienation claims in order to silence women in order to “even the playing field” and have these cases become “he said-she said”, so the judge dismisses the IPV claims.

Ideas to remedy this epidemic in our country:

1. EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE AND COERCIVE CONTROL SHOULD BE MANDATORY FOR ALL FAMILY COURT JUDGES, LAWYERS, CAS WORKERS, SECTION 30 ASSESSORS.
2. IT MUST BE UNDERSTOOD THAT
  - (i) Psychological abuse is a pattern of abuse. Currently judges, lawyer, section 30 assessors, CAS workers try to separate out individual instances of abuse to deal with one incident at a time, which results in minimizing the experience and masks the full weight of the abuse.
  - (ii) Children EXPERIENCE violence and coercive control. Abusive spouses cannot be good parents and this must be acknowledged and parenting plans MUST reflect this
  - (iii) Maximum access for both parents is not always in the best interests of children. Children need to be heard, their rights as per the UN convention MUST be respected and their wishes heavily weighted so as to not put the rights of the abuser ahead of that of the children.
  - (iv) Informed consent to treatment must be respected whereby children have a right to decline harmful reunification therapy. Reunification therapy in all forms, similar to conversion therapy, should be banned in Canada.
  - (v) Parental alienation must finally be debunked as seen as a tactic used by abusers to silence mothers and children. Mother-blaming must stop.
3. Support Keira’s law – Bill C-233. Lives will be saved.
4. Introduce education in schools to teach young girls the red flags of coercive control in order to avoid abusive relationships. Educate young boys on how to treat women with respect.
5. Increase funding for legal aid
6. Recognize and stop litigation abuse by not allowing the bombardment of mothers requiring ongoing lawyer’s services and court appearances.